

Water is Life: How to Stop a Dam through Indigenous Resistance

Throughout the Americas and around the world, struggles to protect water are at the center of a global movement for environmental justice. Through popular education, direct action, and community defense, water protectors are forging new forms of international solidarity and mounting fierce challenges to state and corporate power. Drawing on more than 500 years of collective resistance to colonization, indigenous communities are leading the way, defending the Earth against life-threatening systems of exploitation while building cross-border movements for justice.

“Under a capitalist system, one person has to take advantage of another...they say what we need is electricity to become ‘developed.’ But really, they need the electricity for their mines, for their roads, to build their mansions. They aren’t responding to communities calling for electricity. They’re thinking about how to keep growing the capitalist system.” – Víctor Caal Tzuy, General

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Coordinator, Association of Communities for Development and the Defense of Land and Natural Resources (ACODET)

In Guatemala, ACODET is one such organization – and their decade-plus of organizing offers concrete lessons to movements defending land and neighborhoods. ACODET has staved off the imposition of the Xalalá Dam and strengthened a regional movement for indigenous self-determination. They not only denounce the waste and pollution of water, but also lift up the need to protect indigenous life and strengthen community defense. As Caal shares, “We know they want to use our water to exploit other resources...if things stay like this, there won’t be a future for indigenous peoples. We can’t count on state resources to defend us from the corporate class, because the government has been bought.”

Background: The Ixcán organizes in the face of the Xalalá Dam

If built, the Xalalá Dam would be Guatemala’s second largest, impacting community water supplies in the municipalities of Ixcán, Uspantán, and Cobán. The project would flood towns, dry up water sources, displace thousands, and destroy the balance that sustains life in the region known as the Ixcán in Quiché and Alta Verapaz. Originally conceived in the 1970s, the project has faced widespread resistance since it started to gain traction again with the Guatemalan government in the early 2000s.

In swift response, communities in the Ixcán organized an autonomous popular referendum in 2007 – nearly 90% of voters rejected the dam’s construction and further denounced the imposition of any megaproject in the region. Neighboring Uspantán followed with its own referendum in 2009, rejecting the dam by similar margins and establishing nearly unanimous regional opposition to the dam. These early efforts led to the formation of ACODET, who celebrated a major organizing victory in 2008 when they successfully stymied a bidding process on the proposed dam. Ever since, ACODET has continued its rigorous base-building efforts,

allowing them to leverage broad community opposition in strategic moments to stall a project beleaguered by controversy and corruption.



Photo: Members of ACODET stand beside a sign that reads “Life is struggle and we struggle always. Ixcán, we want you without a dam.”

A Decade of Defense Strategies: Community resistance based in education and unity

Following the Ixcán referendum, ACODET focused efforts on spreading awareness about the threats the project posed to their people and their territory. Organizers noticed Guatemala's National Electrification Institute (INDE, in Spanish) exploiting the material needs of community members by trying to buy their land or offering gifts in exchange for signatures in support of the dam. Using popular education in response to these attempts at manipulation and misinformation, they held meetings in their own and neighboring communities, and successfully countered the state's divide-and-conquer strategy.

To demonstrate the scale of the dam's potential impact, ACODET created maps that they printed on banners to publicly show how 92 communities would be directly affected by its construction. In conversations with impacted communities, ACODET addressed one of INDE's key claims: that the project would bring "development" to the region. Guatemala, they explained, already produces more electricity than it uses, and yet the majority of people in top-producing regions, most of whom are indigenous, still do not have electricity. What's more, many have lost access to rivers that have historically served as a source of life because of such projects, whose energy fuels further extraction.

ACODET grounds awareness-raising efforts in history, acknowledging the direct links between genocide and



Photo: ACODET's organizing strategies include regular meetings and teach-ins at the community and regional level.

resource extraction in Guatemala. Taking inspiration and insight from the experiences of other communities faced with imposed megaprojects, they have resisted INDE's attempts to sow community division by making unity the central tenet of their organizing strategy. By requiring that members participate as entire communities and not as individuals, ACODET has made it difficult for INDE to pit neighbor against neighbor. This solidarity has proved an effective and lasting barrier to INDE's attempted land grabs; through years of organizing, ACODET communities have agreed to require that all individual land sales be approved by the whole community. This way, Caal explains, "people know that if they sell their lands, they'll affect their neighbors."

Internationalism as transnational defense against transnational exploitation

Recognizing the power of solidarity and the interconnected nature of the threats faced by indigenous people, ACODET strengthens their movement for environmental justice by sharing success stories with others struggling in defense of territory. In Guatemala, they regularly exchange with other struggles and show up for other communities defending their rivers. Internationally, they partner with organizations like NISGUA to build solidarity between people and movements across borders, always with the goal of sharing what has most worked for them: peaceful, unified, community-based resistance that heads off a project before construction even begins.



Photo: Víctor Caal Tzuy, pictured above with Duwamish Tribal Council leader Ken Workman, on horizontal exchanges: **"Where there are politically conscious indigenous people that have the resources to defend themselves, there's the chance to create connections... Whenever we meet up with other communities, we see that they are in struggle too. We have to listen to them and exchange ideas. That way, the powerful will realize that it's not just a small number of people getting organized - it's the whole country, the whole world."**

We at NISGUA understand that environmental defense is fundamentally a struggle for racial, economic, and social justice. We stand with those who are most directly impacted by the intersecting systems that drive environmental injustice and commit ourselves to supporting the liberatory visions of movements for community self-determination, human dignity, and respect for the Earth.